

First Parish Church: standing the test of time

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The following is the third in a series examining the history and role of churches and houses of worship in Duxbury.

In 1632, when Elder William Brewster and several farmers who had moved out to Duxborough from the Plymouth Colony asked to be let out of their contract with First Parish Plymouth, First Parish of Duxbury was founded.

The town wasn't incorporated until 1637 – five years later. “We have been a part of this town since before it was a town,” said First Parish’s minister Rev. Catherine Cullen.

“We are a result of the first group of farmers to break away from the Plymouth Colony. I always envision those farmers schlepping with their families and all their stuff to Plymouth every Sunday.... lucky to get back before dark in the winter as church was an all-day event.” Noting that those nine miles to Plymouth’s original church from Duxbury takes 15 minutes by car today, and that it would be more likely two hours by horse and buggy, Cullen said the original Duxbury residents were just interested in having a church that was close to home. So First Parish Duxbury was formed; it was originally on Chestnut Street at the cemetery there. The Chestnut Street site was the spot for the first two meeting houses built for Duxburians.



The interior of the First Parish Church has very tall historic windows made to let in light before the invention of electricity.



Reverend Catherine Cullen at the pulpit of First Parish Church, which has stood on Tremont Street

In 1834, Massachusetts separated church and state and the process of having a meeting house that was for both church and town meeting ended. But the church still played an active role in the town of Duxbury. Soon after, in 1840, Duxbury resident Ezra Weston, aka King Caesar, built the First Parish building that stands today, large and graceful, with windows that extend close to floor and ceiling.

“He made it a much bigger, expansive building,” Cullen noted. “But as ships got larger, it became very difficult to build them in Duxbury bay, which we know dries up when the tide goes out, so shipbuilding moved to the North Shore. This building is a testament to a time when Duxbury had quite a financial boom.”

First Parish, which is next door to the town hall, has been with Duxbury for so long, it makes sense that this building would take an active role in the community to this day.

since 1840. The parish was formed in 1632.

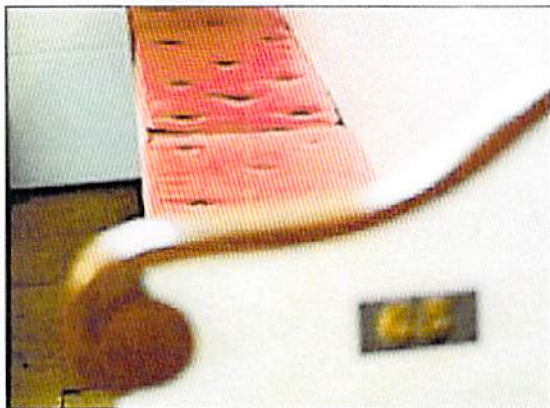
The Memorial Day parade starts and ends at the church every year; the day's ceremonies begin with a worship service. The town's fifth and sixth graders have been attending ballroom classes at First Parish for many years. The Bay

Players hold their plays at First Parish a few times a year. Girl Scouts come over to bake cookies in the church kitchen. Baccalaureate services for graduating high school seniors are held there and the church plays an active role in Duxbury's Interfaith Council.

Recently, the church started a chapter for the support group PFLAG Parents and Friends of Lesbian, Gay and Transgender people.

"We have a very good relationship with the town," said Cullen, joking that sometimes she didn't know where the church property line ends and town hall's begins. "It works out though," she said, "because Sunday is our big day and it's not theirs." In 1978, First Parish was added to the National Register of Historic Places. A few years ago, when the church members knew they had to replace the building's huge, almost floor-to-ceiling windows, they went to the town to help with the costs. The town met funds raised by the church and the historic windows were repaired. "This is an old church," said Cullen. "So whenever we have to repair anything, it's incredibly more expensive than it would be for a newer building."

Cullen is co-chair of the Duxbury FACTS (Families, Adolescents and Communities Together Against Substances) group, which has been organized to combat a growing drug problem among teenagers. She is also on the Council on Aging and the King Caesar Council (both by selectmen's appointment).



Photos by Mary McKenzie

A pew at the First Parish Church, which is next door to Duxbury's town hall.